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# THE PERSISTENCE OF BEAUTY

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The notion of beauty, in its various meanings and manifestations, has long fascinated authors and critics. Its appeal fuelled the artistic endeavours of the nineteenth century, captivated its audiences, and haunted the literary movements of the last one hundred years. Walter Pater, in the opening lines of *The Renaissance*, a touchstone for Victorian aestheticism, observed how attempts to 'define beauty' have most often been conducted 'in the abstract'. Pater's call for the 'student of æsthetics' to observe beauty in its specific instances – in separate works of art, experienced by individual observers – holds in play the idea of beauty both as an eternal value and a fleeting impression: a universal truth and nothing more than a fluctuating emotion subject to the vagaries of time and change. In his conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater declares that 'art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass'.[1] And yet, like Keats's Grecian Urn that suspends one beautiful moment in art, many attempts have been made to halt such passings, and surrender worldly time to poetic timing. The narratives of literature may be destined to end, but, as Keats's urn implies, the single portrait of beauty, captured in painting or in sculpture, may exist, though paralysed, throughout time. With the rise of photographic art, beauty in the physical form was ever more susceptible to capture; as the early photographer Julia Margaret Cameron wrote in 1874, 'I longed to arrest all beauty that came before me'.[2]

When the *fin de siècle* gave way to the twentieth century, so we are told, beauty's days were numbered. From intellectual reactions against the ideologies of the world wars, to the functional designs of architectural modernisers, beauty, allegedly, was found wanting. This growing distrust over beauty's value was joined by a feeling pre-empted by the protagonist of George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman* (1903): 'Beauty is all very well at first sight', she states; 'but who ever looks at it when it has been in the house three days?'[3] The rise of aesthetic movements across Europe, and the continued lyrical innovations in English poetry throughout the nineteenth century, may have driven a desire for new styles. Yet who laid down these declinist narratives in such stark terms in the first place? I. A.

[1] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. D. L. Hill (Berkeley, CA 1980), pp. xix, 190.
[2] Julia Margaret Cameron, 'Annals of My Glass House' (1874), in *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Her Photographic Work*, ed. Helmut Gernsheim (London 1975), p. 180.
[3] George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, in *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw* (London 1934), p. 402.

Richards, as Angela Leighton suggests, was one leading influence on these literary-critical narratives. Between the scepticism and the latent hostility, however, rejections of beauty are rarely so absolute.

Recent critical revivals of beauty have defended its virtues, while, at their best, resisting such narratives of decline. Over the last two decades, more than a dozen books have taken beauty either as their theme or muse. Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), Denis Donoghue's *Speaking of Beauty* (2003) and Richard Scholar's *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe* (2005) represent but a few of these critical reassessments. *The Persistence of Beauty* furthers and analyses this revival by re-examining the notion of artistic beauty, and its fate in the literary and critical movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its essayists include Sarah Wootton writing on Charlotte Brontë, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst on Charles Dickens, Simon J. James on the trials of Oscar Wilde, Seamus Perry on T. S. Eliot, Mark Sandy on Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens, and Tony Sharpe on W. H. Auden. Joining these opening chapters are contributions by Angela Leighton on Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop, Michael O'Neill on Hopkins, Yeats, Crane and Spender, Fran Brearton on Robert Graves and Louis MacNeice, and Timothy Morton on Kant. What results is a wide-reaching exploration of such concepts as the beauty of style, the morality of aesthetics, and the relations between truth and the imagination as they twist and turn at the hands of individual writers.

Challenging simplistic notions of naïve 'Romantic beauty', the volume's introduction illuminates beauty's trials and affirmations in the works of Keats, Shelley and Coleridge. It reconnects the twentieth century's doubts about beauty's value and truth to those of the Romantics; and it sets the scene for the many permutations of those doubts that would surface long before the aesthetic movements of *l'art pour l'art*. In his chapter on Dickens, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst notes the novelist's 'knack for retrieving unexpected moments of beauty from the unlikeliest of places' (p. 32). No one would associate Dickens's London with idealised beauty. Indeed, the sense of pathos triggered by the cruelties in *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*, or even Esther's scarred face in *Bleak House*, are essential to the tragedy that underlies these novels' power to move the reader, and to yearn for a world that more closely matches the ideal. If the worlds of these novels, however, are not themselves enacting an ideal life, then the beauty of their prose style, and the alternatives to the social worlds they depict, nonetheless engage with beauty's truth. 'To describe ugliness', as Douglas-Fairhurst expands, 'without succumbing to it allows us to remain loyal to the world in its current state, while also offering a glimpsed aesthetic alternative' (p. 32). The implications for such an alternative run to the heart of Dickens's genres. The word 'beauty', in other words, 'acts as a bridge between realism and romance, or how things are and how we would like them to be' (p. 33).

Set against this abstract and idealising notion of beauty for which the reader constantly strives, the chapter proceeds to discuss the more mundane and worldly forms of beauty that figure across Dickens's narratives. Beauty and cosmetics, for instance, are disentangled with particular eloquence, as artificial products are seen to proliferate throughout Dickens's work. It is Douglas-Fairhurst's prose style, just as in Dickens, that is capable of holding these two competing senses of beauty in wonderful

tension, each elevating or ensnaring the other. As the chapter states, 'If a thing of beauty is a joy forever, it seems the trick to remaining beautiful in Dickens's imagination is to make oneself as much like a thing as possible' (p. 39). Finally, the chapter pulls its multiple threads together in the idea of beauty within Dickens's narrative structures. The nineteenth century, as several of the volume's essays indicate, gave rise to an industry of books entitled, variously, *The Beauties of Dickens*, or *The Beauties of George Eliot*, with countless others in this genre, each extracting *belles* passages and thoughts. The relation of such 'beautiful' extracts to periodical culture might be a particularly fruitful avenue for further enquiry; for as Douglas-Fairhurst suggests of *The Pickwick Papers*, as they 'developed, they became far more than a set of detachable "beauties".' Rather, 'they became a crucial part of his narrative structure' (p. 41), as the episodic forms of Dickens's novels interact with their narrative arcs and the sense of a well-proportioned plot.

Seamus Perry's chapter, on T. S. Eliot, also opens with these detachable 'beauties'. His chapter explains how the *Beauties of Byron* (1824) and *The Beauties of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1830), which were caught up with 'a defunct *belles lettrisme*', were partly responsible for the strength of T. S. Eliot's disclaimer about his literary criticism of Ezra Pound: 'It will not dilate upon "beauties"' (p. 59). We might add that the difference between such extractable 'beauties' and the types of beauty to be found in Eliot lie close to questions about the nature of lyric and the lyrical. If Eliot can at times eschew the short, extractable 'lyric' form, he nonetheless interweaves lyrical moments into his wider poetic project. Perry's chapter stays closer to Eliot's sense of beauty's truth, and to a renewed attention to beauty's explicit treatment in his essays and verse, rather than exploring its links to lyrical impulses in modern poetry. The approach is a much-needed account of how Eliot's philosophical thought interacts with his poetics.

Perry's chapter fully acknowledges the currents in twentieth-century thought that sought to discredit beauty; yet the chapter highlights how Eliot's 'own dissociation from the rhetoric of beauty was far from complete' (p. 64). That word, 'dissociation', is particularly well chosen, as it sits, implicitly, as a complement to Eliot's 'dissociation of sensibility'.[4] Still, it is not so much Eliot's 'dissociation of sensibility' as T. E. Hulme that the article draws into relation with Eliot's poetry. Hulme had celebrated the age's movement 'beyond the rhetoric of beauty'; the epithets of 'graceful, beautiful, etc.' had been replaced by the cleaner semantics of 'austere, mechanical, clear cut, and bare' (p. 61). Eliot, as Perry shows, chose a line that moved beyond Hulme's opposites. As Eliot wrote, 'The essential advantage for a poet is not, to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory' (p. 63).

But what if the artist requires no charming world in order to create beauty? 'The artist is the creator of beautiful things': these are the words that open Oscar Wilde's 'Preface' to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (p. 45). In a letter to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde wrote how 'I treated art as the

[4] T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn. (London 1951), p. 288.

supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction' (p. 48). Appealing though it may be, such belief in the aesthetic truth of the imagination is, as Simon J. James states, only 'sustainable' for 'as long as art can be sustained as wholly self-referential': 'wholly removed from discourses of the material, the financial, and, in particular, the legal' (p. 48). The vivid subject of James's chapter is how 'These spheres collided' in the trials of Oscar Wilde, in 1895. By attempting to prove an author's meaning and intentions, both lawyers and the state had not only to interpret Wilde's texts and his letters, but to 're-establish the normative connections between art and life' (p. 48). They needed, in other words, to dismantle the idea of art for its own sake, of dramatic voices detached from their author's views, and restore authorial responsibility and 'ownership' over the meaning of their literary works.

The transcript of these trials, which silently reappeared in the British Library in 2000, following a lengthy absence, has been reproduced by Fourth Estate: a shrewdly presented edition, which sets out the entire court scene as a play, or even farce (p. 49). Fittingly, Wilde's evasiveness over his written meanings – and his insistence that everything he wrote was art – read almost like one of his characters:

> CARSON [LAWYER]: Suppose a man, now, who was not an artist had written this letter to a handsome young man, as I believe Lord Alfred Douglas is? [...]
> WILDE: A man who was not an artist could never have written that letter.[5]

Carson, according to James, 'dons the drag of a variety of different literary theorists to see what a number of different ways of reading might produce – from Aristotelian mimesis, reader-response theory, the intentional fallacy, material culture, textual criticism, genre theory, psychobiography, history of the book…' (p. 54). Even Walter Pater was quoted, in a letter warning Wilde against making the sin at the heart of *Dorian Gray* more explicit. As Wilde defended the novel in the *Scots Observer*, 'each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray' (p. 56). Chasing hidden meanings in Wilde's works, Carson became a 'textual critic, editing his own variorum of the 1890 *Lippincott's Magazine* edition and 1891 Ward Lock editions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*' (p. 55). Wilde's trials forced to the open anciently troubled questions over literary meaning and the relation of beauty to truth. It is this unknowability, and the connotations of a work that are never explicitly expressed, which is central to many of the nineteenth century's aesthetic successes. The chapter turns to the importance of the word 'something' to generate not only that mystery – the potential sexual suggestions of the word at the *fin de siècle* – but also the sense of literary secrets, of a power beyond description.

'Something' – a word bound up with beauty's 'ineffable' appeal – is central to Angela Leighton's chapter on Frost and Bishop (103). Leighton's essay also opens with a discussion of Pater's phrase, 'beauty in the abstract', and it questions whether 'something' so pervasive and multiform ever truly vanished as the twentieth century reacted to the Victorians. Tracing the ambiguous phrases in

[5] *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland (London 2003), p. 105.

modern poetry that yield references to beauty's charm, the chapter offers an altered sense of Bishop's own relationship with the aesthetic. By its end, the chapter suggests how beauty's undefinable appeal 'instigates, inspires and then recharges the act of interpretation' (p. 115). Those plural and unknowable senses of beauty are at the heart of several further chapters, especially Michael O'Neill's essay on Hopkins, Yeats, Hart Crane and Spender. Close literary analysis of Hopkins's 'To What Serves Mortal Beauty', and Yeats's 'Adam's Curse', for instance, demonstrate how that word is always immersed in the drama of the verse in which it occurs. One wonders how much of 'Adam's Curse' unsettles Keats's description of 'Adam's dream': 'he awoke and found it truth', when the world of the imagination could become reality. As Fran Brearton notes in her chapter on Robert Graves and Louis MacNeice, 'If beauty has been in trouble in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the cause of some of that trouble may be found in the trenches of 1914-1918.' The harsh realities, in other words, shattered not only the dreams but their beauty, too. What each of the volume's essays demonstrate, however, is how engagement with beauty relies on its individual and irreducible works of art.

That attention to style, a sensitivity displayed throughout this volume, celebrates some of the best that literary analysis has to offer: fixed to the poems and novels that stand as the particular evidence against which all philosophies and theories must, eventually, be tested. These chapters lend themselves to Pater's call for beauty to be observed in its specific instances, the distinct yet plural cases of its use, that support or stand against our accepted narratives of 'beauty in the abstract'.

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